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M A N D A C A R U

I once heard a man say, in describing the southwestern United States, "There won't nothin' grow in Arizona without it's got thorns on it". The same might almost be said of the interior of Pernambuco, especially the sertão. There is a great variety and abundance of thorny growths, among which the cactus family is especially well represented. And chief of the cactus clan is the great treelike form called still by the name it bore among the aborigines, mandacarú.

Really, there are two tree-like cactus forms, the other being known as faxeira. To an unpracticed eye they might appear similar, but there are important differences. While the faxeira stems are practically round, lightly fluted, and covered with an infinity of relatively small and short thorns, (that does not mean that they may be trifled with) the mandacarú is so deeply fluted that a cross section of it resembles an irregular five pointed star, and the terrible thorns, two inches long, are borne only on the ridges that form the "star points". Because of this feature, it is a comparatively simple matter to remove the thorns from mandacarú with a sharp knife, slicing down each ridge in turn.

These cacti are not without economic significance, and the fazendeiros willingly let them grow, knowing that they may need them in a time of drouth, when other forage is exhausted. Hungry cattle will eat them gladly when the thorns are removed; and the fazendeiro, ever adept with a knife, strips the thorns from the stately mandacarú, and provides feed for his cattle. It is not so easy to remove the thorns from faxeira, but it is possible to burn them off, and this is often done. People tell me that in the sertão, where drouth is common, the only animal that ever manages to eat the cactus without human aid is the lowly ass, who, when desperate, will knock down the cactus stems and paw at them until he removes the thorns so that he can eat them.

There is a cultivated variety of cactus, of the "prickly pear" type, called palma, from the resemblance of the pads to the palm of a hand in shape. We must not confuse this name with the palm tree, which is called a palmeira. I was informed that

the Brazilians were cultivating this practically thornless variety long before Luther Burbank began his efforts to produce thornless cactus. It is widely cultivated in the dry interior of northeast Brazil, especially for dairy cattle. A man from the interior of Bahia once told me that palma was good cooked as a vegetable, and I even went so far as to have our cook prepare some; but we must not have used the right recipe, for the family showed no enthusiasm for it, and we never tried again. But as a last resort, one could always fall back on it.

Mandacaru also has medicinal properties; or such, at least, is the belief of the people, and probably not without foundation. In the latter part of 1942 I began to be bothered with muscular rheumatism in my left leg. I went to doctors and had the customary round of X-rays, blood tests, etc., and took all the medicines the doctors prescribed, without any noticeable effect. A friend said to me, "If you really want to get well, make some tea of mandacaru and drink it." He explained how it should be made: take three or four cross section slices about an inch thick of the cactus stem, and boil them for half an hour or so in about two quarts of water, then strain and cool the water, and drink it in lieu of other drinking water. The taste is not very disagreeable, especially if cold. My friend assured me that if I would do that conscientiously for six months I would never again be troubled with rheumatism. I can not say as to that; I do know that I tried it, and immediately began to feel better, and in a month or so all symptoms of rheumatism had left me, and I stopped taking the tea. When I had a recurrence a year or so later I took it again, and have never been bothered since. It may be, of course, that the doctors' medicine finally began to take effect after all that time; but it looked like the mandacaru was responsible for the cure. I have since heard that the people use it also for treatment of dysentery with good results. Perhaps there is an important medicine here awaiting discovery.

Another variety of cactus that grows into a tree-like form is called aveloz. It has no thorns, but does not lack for protection, as it has a poisonous juice that causes acute inflammation, especially of the eyes. In the United States it is sometimes grown in pots as an ornamental plant, and called "devil's finger". In Brazil it may grow to be twenty feet tall, and is extensively planted for hedges, for which it



is most effective, as it grows very thick, and repels animals because of its juice. A man assured me that even a snake could not go through such a hedge, but that, I think, was an exaggeration. But it will stop cattle. Nevertheless, I once saw a cow calmly bite off a mouthful of the green stems, and go munching them as if she enjoyed them. Cows, like people, have queer tastes sometimes.

Of course there are many other thorny plants besides the cacti. One is called rosa mole (soft rose), in derision I suppose, though really, apart from its thorns, there are few prettier plants one could have in his garden. It has rich, glossy, dark green foliage, and lovely rose-pink blossoms, and stays in bloom for months. But it has an abundant supply of wicked thorns about an inch and a half in length, with barbed points, so that when one enters the flesh it is practically impossible to remove it completely, so that a festering sore almost invariably results. Rosa mole is easily planted by cuttings, that is, branches two or three feet long, planted in the dry season, without any water. If you plant them in the rainy season they will rot instead of taking root. This plant also makes a very effective hedge, though workmen, for obvious reasons, are loath to work with it.

Pineapples are rather thorny; but they have some wild cousins going by the general family name of gravatá that can claim some distinction among earth's thorny plants. Of course anyone who has been in the woods at all knows our familiar blackberry and greenbriers, and must have noticed that the thorns all curve back toward the base of the stem, so that by pulling in the right direction one may release himself without great difficulty. But there is a variety of gravatá that has the thorns turned both ways. Having thorns down both sides of the long leaves, there will be perhaps a dozen thorns turned back toward the base, then about the same number turned forward toward the end of the leaf, then some more toward the base. When one gets thoroughly entangled in thorns of this character, he is in a serious situation. Gravatá also used to be planted for hedges, but now the public health department discourages this on the ground that it furnishes cover for rats, since gravatá has a tendency to catch and hold rain water at the base of its leaves, greatly to the convenience of rats and other small animals.

There are many thorn bearing trees, one familiar variety being called espinheiro (thorn tree). But there is one called laranginha or limãozinho from so real or fancied resemblance in odor to the orange or lemon tree. This tree has its trunk covered with thorns about an inch in length, and almost an inch in thickness at the base. But as the tree grows older these have a tendency to disappear, leaving only the thorns on the leaves to plague barefoot boys. Each leaf has one or more thorns on its under side, about half an inch in length, and while slender, very and sharp. When the leaves fall to the ground these thorns are turned upwards — straight up. It is a valuable timber tree, but people who go barefooted curse it heartily.

One little plant that has a potency out of all proportion to its size and appearance is called tiririca. It grows in the woods, and attains two or three feet in height with little narrow, inconspicuous leaves, the whole plant seeming utterly insignificant. But the Brazilians pointed it out to me and told me to beware of it. Those innocent looking leaves are armed with teeth as sharp as razors, and will literally cut your clothes, or flesh, to ribbons.

Nettles are not exactly thorns, but a discussion of the perils of wandering in the wilds of Brazil would hardly be complete without mention of them. I remember two varieties, both, I think, called ortiga. One is a little vine, somewhat resembling a morning glory vine, except that the leaves have serrate edges. The other is common in the sertão, a weed growing to two or three feet in height, whose deeply lobed leaves have a characteristic grey-green color that quickly warns the experienced hunter. Even so, one sometimes makes involuntary contact with it, and receives a terrible burn. The ortiga is not to be despised.

Even if I could remember the names that the people carefully told me for the many different varieties of cactus I should exhaust the patience of my readers in repeating them. Two other varieties, however, deserve to be mentioned. One is called xique-xique, or chique-chique, (pronounced sheekie-sheekie). It tries to grow up and branch out like faxeira, but never gets anywhere, always twisting around on itself and wallowing on the ground. But I believe it can muster more thorns to the square

inch than any other plant that grows. It forms a major part of the vegetation in much of the sertão. The Brazilians have taken over the familiar French word chic, which they write, and pronounce, chique; and it is not uncommon in Portuguese to repeat a final adjective for emphasis. On an excursion once with a bus load of high school children we were passing through a region where chique-chique formed the greater part of the scenery, so I decided to venture a pun, and said, "Esta é uma paisagem chique, chique." (This scenery is so chic) I thought it one of the most successful puns I ever made in Portuguese, though maybe they only laughed because I was the diretor.

Then there is a small, melon type cactus, growing a little larger than a cantaloupe, called coroa de frade (monk's crown), because the almost bare top part, above a circle of vicious thorns, gives it something of the appearance of a monk's shaven poll. The thorns on these are long and close together, and when very dry may produce a rattling sound when struck. I heard a story of a man who, walking at night shod with sandals open at the toe, struck his foot against one of these, his toe being pierced by the thorns, and at the same time hearing the rattling sound, which convinced him that he had been bitten by a rattlesnake. He almost died of fright before discovering his mistake.